THE PRODUCT MANAGER ROLE EXPLAINED

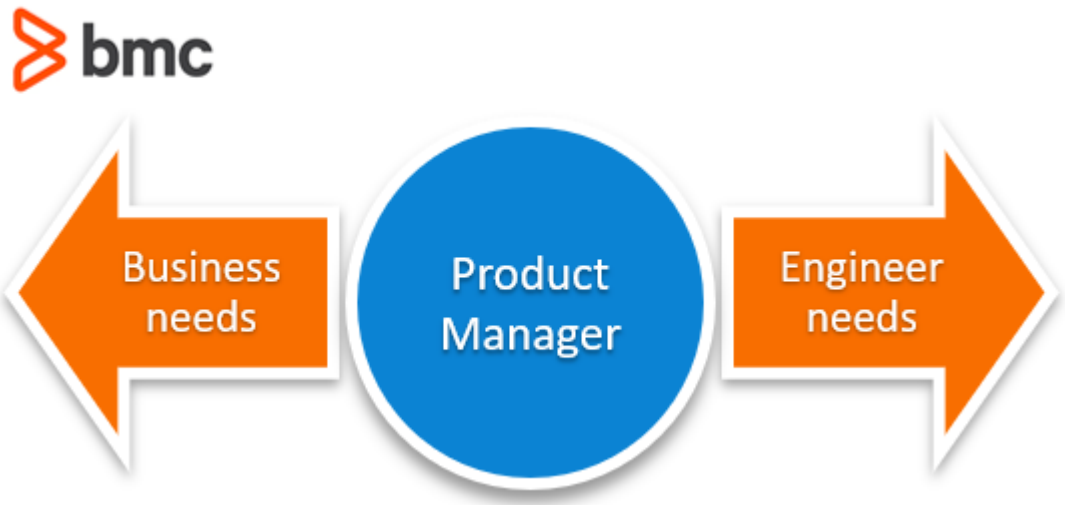


The role of Product Manager originated with the need to communicate between the business leaders and the engineers. While product manager methods can vary team-to-team, product-to-product, and manager-to-manager, product managers have one primary mission: **build a successful product**.

Let's look at the role of the product manager.

What does a product manager do?

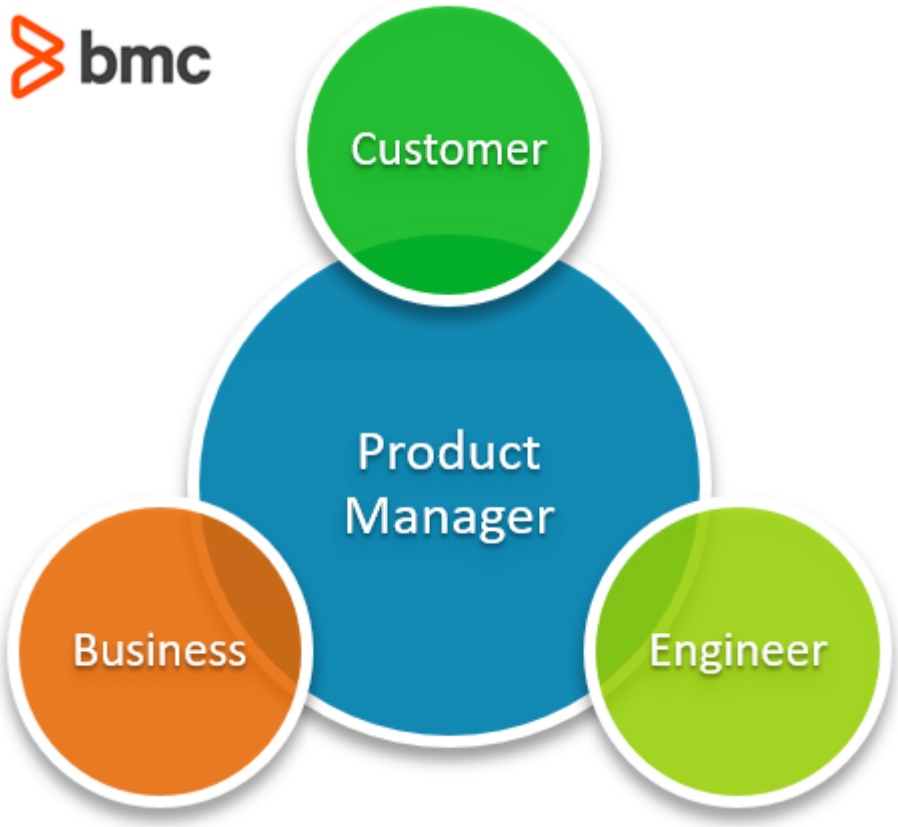
Product managers are the medium that communicates between the businessmen and the engineers.



Why is this mediator necessary? The business guys are expected to have their ears to the ground in order to determine:

- What customers want
- What the markets want
- What the accountants say they can afford

The engineers are the people who can build products to meet the demands the business guys are hearing. The tendency is to picture Product Managers situated right in the middle of this diagram:



Responsibilities of a product manager

The responsibilities of a product manager depend on a variety of things. Keeping its purpose in mind—building the product—the responsibilities of the PM will change with respect to the size of the company, and the size of the product management team. Additional factors, like whether the team works in an Agile product development manner, can also inform how PMs function.

Here are some factors that determine how product managers will work best in your organization:

Team size matters

The smaller the team, the wider the scope the responsibilities might be. The larger the team, the more specialized the Product Manager's role might be.

Technical or not

Depending on the team's skills and the company's resources, the Product Manager may be a technical role or of a non-technical nature. For instance, the PM might act as the lead engineer, which would require a different skillset from a PM who is a scheduler and motivator.

Jack of all trades vs the specialist

The greater the company grows, the more specialized the PMs job can be. At the beginning stages of a product or a product management team, a PM might take on all the roles:

- A designer imagining a solution
- An engineer building a solution
- A businessman couching the solution in market demand and company finances
- A researcher conducting customer interviews and satisfaction surveys

As the department grows, the PMs role can shift towards its most essential duty—determining what the best product is—and passing that information down the pipeline to the engineers so they can build it.

A PM with little to no specialization may support a variety of activities:

- Customer and sales calls
- Customer feedback
- Engineer meetings
- Business and investor meetings
- User experience design
- Updates and reports

As a PM's role becomes more specialized, perhaps more technical, tasks may change to include:

- Reviewing PM approaches with other PMs
- Creating product development timelines
- Receiving and understanding market and financial updates from the business teams
- Receiving and understanding updates from engineer teams
- Conducting and reviewing market research
- Surveying customers for feedback
- Creating pitches to sell a new product roadmap

The most specialized PMs might get directly involved in engineering and business tasks, such as:

- **Engineering:** A/B testing UX features; testing back-end features; researching new features
- **Business:** Reviewing customer behavior and spending, sales targets, and spending budgets

Product Manager skills

Whether you already have them or need to acquire them, the best product managers tend to possess certain skills, particularly:

- Communication
- Organization
- Cross-discipline knowledge
- Empathy

Communication

The primary role of a PM is to stay up to date on what is happening with a product and relay information to both engineers and businessmen so action can be taken. Communication is essential to the success of a PM—without it, you might need a different job.

Good communication happens through an ability to listen and respond timely and effectively. PMs utilize several methods to communicate, often in combination:

- Project management tools, like JIRA
- Visuals, like Kanban boards
- Statistics
- Written reports

Organization

A lot of information gets passed through the PM—they are a medium between businessmen and engineers—and there can be a lot of concepts that get passed through them they do not yet understand. A successful PM pairs strong communication with strong organization, making sure the right information gets passed on without any information lost, or distorted, in translation.

Cross-discipline knowledge

Finally, by nature, Product Managers tend to communicate between two parties, each with different knowledge bases. This means the PM must be able to adapt both the language used (technical jargon) and communication styles to suit whom they are speaking.

Engineers tend to value task items and problem-solving details, while businessmen tend to value profit-loss numbers, generic high-level thinking, and user reports. Generally speaking, engineers prefer the “how” and businessmen prefer the “why”. Product managers will be more successful when they can work both sides of the aisle and give each party the information they want.

Empathy

A critical skill that’s often forgotten is empathy. PMs work with people of all different personalities and specialties. Top-down management—declaring deadlines and must-have features without consulting with others—is usually a fast road to failure.

The most successful PMs work to understand each individual they work with. One engineer might need a long leash. One business leader might need constant updates. Treating these people in the

exact same way will result in at least one striking back. Instead, the PM should work to empathize with the engineer and the businessman, especially when their priorities are different. The engineer is focused on getting a feature right, but a businessman has deliveries to meet fast.

Using empathy, a PM can understand the motivation for each role, and leverage them to get every member of the team working to full potential.

Product manager salary & outlook

Product Managers are sometimes thought of as rock stars. They're like entrepreneurs inside an incubator, except these people have gone pro. Those who can get things done, and make things happen, are highly sought after.

In fact, the good PMs in the U.S. consistently make well over $100,000 a year, on average. Earning a product management-focused certificate, like The Certified Product Manager™ Credential, can bump good PMs to even higher paydays.

The key to product management success

The PMs' need for empathy and communication means that the personalities that do end up succeeding as PMs are far more varied and well-rounded. The often understood role of the PM is a tactical maneuver from Aristotelian influence, soft power. It is said:

"The PMs task is to influence without authority."

To you, I wish the best of luck.

Additional resources

For more articles on company structure and roles, check out the BMC Business of IT Blog or read these articles:

- Product Owner vs Product Manager: What's the Difference?
- Role of the Project Management Office (PMO) in an IT Organization
- I&O Organizations Defined: Roles, Structures, and Trends
- Business Relationship Manager Role & Responsibilities
- What Is "IT-Business Alignment"?
- 4 Essential Leadership Qualities